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The Experience of Live and Recorded Music: A Cello Solo

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The Experience of Live and Recorded Music: A Cello Solo

Ashlin Hunter

Dr. Christopher Dietz and Dr. Brian Snow, Advisors

College of Musical Arts

Introduction

Americans experience 98.5% of their music in a recorded medium such as radio, online streaming, TV, CDs, or other physical mediums.¹ As a composer of classical concert music, I challenged myself to compose music that offered audiences a meaningful experience as a live performance and as a recorded piece of music.

The history of music is intertwined with the history of musical performance. Audio recording technology was not developed until the late nineteenth century, and until the popularization of physical musical recordings, people experienced music as only a performative art. With the development of long-play records, cassettes, and CDs, our experience with music transformed; we could now listen to music outside of concert halls and performance venues.²

Recording technology began a new divergence of classical music and popular music. Fans of popular music artists await the release of new albums: there is excitement and anticipation surrounding new recorded music. However, classical music fans buy tickets to hear the premiere of a new symphony or piece of chamber music by their favorite composer. For classical music lovers, the joy is in hearing live performance. With my Honors Project, I wrote a piece of music that fulfills expectations as a meaningful live performance and as a valuable recorded experience.

The Music

The piece I composed for this project is titled *heirlooms*, a nine-minute composition for cello and electronics. From the beginning stages of this project, I wanted to write a piece that was inspired by memory, friendship, and growth. These inspirations served as the basis from which I made artistic and creative decisions about the music, the live performance, and the recording. I

¹ *Share of Ear: Americans' Share of Time Spent Listening to Audio Sources* (Edison Research, 2014).

² Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2010).

chose to write for a solo instrument because having a single instrumentalist on the stage allows for a greater potential that the audience members will feel a personal connection to the music. If I had written for a string quartet, for example, there would have been four musicians on the stage. A single musician performing is a more vulnerable and intimate experience.

In addition to how many performers I wanted to include, I carefully considered the instrumentation of the piece. The cello is a visually captivating instrument. The piece is about friendship, and the way a cellist holds the instrument—nestled near the body—lends itself to thoughts of closeness. Furthermore, the frequency range of the cello is similar to that of the human voice, which makes it sound familiar and natural. However, the primary factor for choosing to write for cello was that I could write the piece in collaboration with a childhood friend, Matt Magerkurth,, an excellent cellist.

Because I know Matt and have seen him perform on many concerts, I would better be able to craft the live performance. As I composed the piece, I personalized the music for him. Matt is both a classically-trained cellist and a phenomenal improviser. The score³ is a combination of specific, written-out musical material and poetic, open-ended improvisational instructions. This allowed Matt to embody the piece. This embodiment affected his performance; audience members reflected that Matt’s performance “drew you in”⁴ and “seeing his face while he was playing exuded a sense of joy and brightness.”⁵

³ Appendix 1: *heirlooms* Score

⁴ Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.

⁵ Meghan Cullen, interview with the author, 28 March 2018.

The Live Performance

The piece, *heirlooms*, was performed live on my degree recital on March 24, 2018 in the Conrad Choral Room in the Wolfe Center for the Performing Arts. Because I had previously attended concerts in the Conrad Room, I was familiar with the acoustics and layout of the performance space. This knowledge affected the musical and artistic decisions for the live performance of *heirlooms*. In order to create a sense of intimacy with the performance, I chose to have the piece performed in darkness. The only source of light was from a desk lamp which was placed on a small table next to the cellist (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Matt Magerkurth performing heirlooms in the Conrad Choral Room (March 24, 2018)

This staging decision provided audience members with a sense of familiarity and friendship despite having no personal connection to the performer. In a discussion with music student Meghan

Cullen after the performance, she noted that the lighting “provided anonymity and intimacy.”⁶ She said that because her emotional reactions could not be seen by other people, she felt more immersed in the observation—because the darkness separated her from fellow audience members, it felt more personal; she could focus on the connection between her and the cellist. Another audience member, Andrew Smith, said that the lamp “helped frame [the music] as something very intimate and something that was meant to be an expression of a personal relationship. [The lighting] helped hone in on a kind of warmth and sincerity.”⁷

In addition to serving an artistic purpose, the lighting decision was also one of necessity. Because the instrument was being amplified through two microphones, the use of darkness and the lamp hid the microphones, which were a visual disturbance to the stage.

Another way I controlled the musical experience was through the recital program booklet. Each audience member received a program booklet⁸ that listed the pieces being performed and the program notes for each piece. Because program booklets are the only direct communication composers have with audience members, choosing evocative titles and writing clear and meaningful program notes are essential when crafting the musical experience. I chose the title, *heirlooms*, to convey a sense of age, memory, childhood, and familiarity. These are the program notes for the piece:

You are in a small room with a friend. As you sit across from each other and talk, their voice is familiar—it’s a voice you’ve heard speak thousands of words over many years. The room is comfortable. The walls are the same color they’ve always been; the carpet is soft on your feet; the box on the shelf holds the heirlooms that are physical manifestations of good memories and friendship and family.

⁶ Meghan Cullen, interview with the author, 28 March 2018.

⁷ Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.

⁸ Appendix 2: Recital Program

heirlooms was written for my dear friend Matt Magerkurth who I met when we were 15- and 16-years old at a summer composition workshop in Kansas City. This piece would not exist without our friendship. As I wrote this piece, I would pretend I was in that small room with Matt and his cello. This piece is what it felt like in that room.

One audience member reflected that these program notes added a sense of generosity to the performance—that I was “trying to give [them] the music.”⁹

The Recorded Piece

In order to create a valuable experience as a recorded piece of music, I collaborated with videographer Nick Zoulek to create a film for *heirlooms*. By offering a visual accompaniment to the music, listeners are offered a more meaningful and controlled context in which to experience the piece. The narrative of the film that conveys themes of childhood, memory, and growth. The film begins with a girl admiring childhood heirlooms on a shelf: a teacup, a music box, a key (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A frame from the film—the music box

She packs a picnic and goes into the woods, taking with her a couple of the heirlooms from the shelf. In the woods, she sees a flower. She picks the flower and buries one of the heirlooms in

⁹ Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.

its place. She plants each heirloom as if they are seeds, and from each object a flower grows. She collects each of these flowers, and they eventually fill her room. The last scene of the film shows the girl sitting with the final, unplanted heirloom—the music box—amidst a mess of flowers (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A frame from the film—the final scene

Similar to the function of program notes and lighting for the live performance, the film allowed me to control the context in which a listener experiences the music.

Another important factor when distributing recorded music is the quality of the audio. A recording from the live performance would have audience and room noise, so I held a recording session to create a high-quality and controlled recording. For the studio recording, I worked with recording artist Stephen Hennessey. We used five microphones to record the piece (Figure 4). By using varied microphones with specific spatial orientations, we were able to create a recording that sounds clear and natural.



Figure 4: Recording heirlooms

Unlike live performances, I cannot control when or where a person will experience the piece or how they are listening to the music (with headphones, through phone speakers, etc.); however, by providing high-quality audio and offering a visual experience, listeners are more likely to be immersed in the piece and connect to the music.

Conclusion and Reflection

Although the music remained the same for the live performance and the recorded piece, I used the proclivities of each medium to craft two different artistic experiences. Both experiences retained the themes of friendship, memory, and intimacy that I planned from the beginning stages of the project, but they differed in the way this goal was achieved. With the live performance, the intimacy was created through the lighting and program notes. For the recorded version, the

connection was made through the recording techniques and the visual accompaniment of the film collaboration.

While I had never composed music intended for a recording until this project, many of my interests in writing concert music translated well to the recorded piece. As a composer, I am interested in the live music experience; I think beyond the notes and harmonies and consider what it feels like to sit in a concert hall and hear my music. Through this project, I created a piece of music that is intended for people to experience as part of a group—as an audience member—and alone with headphones or through their phone or laptop.

A video comparing the live performance and the short film versions can be viewed at this web address: <https://youtu.be/cMjNxxMJyzY>. The video showcases the first few minutes of the live performance, the recorded audio without film, and the short film with audio.

Appendix 1: Score

heirlooms

for singing cellist and fixed media

Ashlin Hunter

Performance notes:

Each unmetered line is approximately 30 seconds.

For harmonic pizzicato: “nut,” “bridge,” and “center” indicate which node should be used to create the written pitch

+ = L. H. pizzicato

ovp. = overpressure

s. p. = sul ponticello

heirlooms

for Matt

Delicate and patient

Ashlin Hunter

remember friendship blue (the color of distance)

Score for *heirlooms* (Delicate and patient), featuring Voice, Cello, and Electronics.

0:00

Electronics: Treble and Bass staves. Treble staff has a chord of two notes (F#4 and C#5) with a fermata. Bass staff is empty.

Cello: Bass staff. Measure 1: Half note G2 with a "+" above it and a forte (*f*) dynamic below. Measure 2: Treble staff has a half note G4 with a "pizz." (pizzicato) marking above, a "III" marking above, and a "bridge" marking below. Measure 3: Treble staff has a half note G4 with a "nut" marking below. A piano (*p*) dynamic is marked below the first measure of this section.

Voice: Bass staff. Empty.

with lightness

Score for *heirlooms* (with lightness), featuring Voice, Cello, and Electronics.

0:30

Electronics: Treble and Bass staves. Treble staff has a chord of two notes (F#4 and C#5) with a fermata. Bass staff is empty.

Cello: Treble staff. Measure 1: Quarter note G4 with a "IV nut" marking above. Measure 2: Quarter note A4 with a "I cen." marking above. Measure 3: Quarter note B4 with a "III br." marking above. Measure 4: Quarter note C5 with a "IV nut" marking above. Measure 5: Quarter note G4 with a "IV br." marking above. Measure 6: Quarter note A4 with a "II nut" marking above. Measure 7: Quarter note B4 with a "I cen." marking above. Measure 8: Quarter note C5 with a "II br." marking above. Measure 9: Quarter note G4 with a "III nut" marking above. Measure 10: Quarter note A4 with a "IV nut" marking above. A slur connects measures 1-4 and 5-10.

Voice: Bass staff. Empty.

Voice

II — IV — IV III —
cen. nut br. nut nut br. nut

Cello

Elec.

1:00

Voice

repeat phrase three times (vary notes, order, and durations):
1) with blue longing 3) lost in memory

Cello

2) with remembrance of blooming peonies

Elec.

Double Happiness

p

ahh

arco

f

1:30

Voice

as if tracing constellations on the strings

Cello

pizz.

p

Elec.

2:00

falsetto, humming

mmm

2:30

sub. *p*

arco
fuzzy, feathery multiphonics
IV

mmm

pizz.
II

ahh

p *f* sub. *p*

3:00

$\text{♩} = 100$

f

ahh

ahh

ahh

arco

pizz.

arco

f

3:30

Voice *f*
 ooh
 Cello *mp* *p* *ppp*
 L.H. on fingerboard
 pizz. barely brush strings
 Elec.
 3:44

Voice
 Cello *p* *ppp* *f* *p*
 (L.H. on fingerboard)
 pizz.
 arco thin, buzzy multiphonics
 I
 8va
 II
 Elec.
 4:02

Voice *p* *f* *p* *f*
 ooh
 Cello *f*
 pizz.
 arco
 ahh
 5
 Elec.
 4:32

4:52

Voice

Cello

Elec.

off the string
II
I IV III
ovp. ord.
s. p.
ord.

4:52

5:02

Voice

Cello

Elec.

III
II
(III)
3

5:02

5:09

Voice

Cello

Elec.

ovp. ord.
II
I
3
IV
III

5:09

Voice:

Cello:

Elec.:

5:15

rit.

Voice:

Cello:

Elec.:

5:23

repeat phrase five times (preserve order):

1) for the end of things

2) a whispering

3) a lullaby

Voice:

Cello:

Elec.:

5:55

4) colorful like a
Paul Jenkins painting

5) as if beginning

16

Voice

Cello

Elec.

6:25

pick up music box and begin
turning the crank (not amplified by cello)

Voice

Cello

Elec.

6:55

rest music box on to cello to amplify

Voice

Cello

Elec.

7:25

8:10



The College of Musical Arts presents

ASHLIN HUNTER

COMPOSITION

from the studio of Dr. Christopher Dietz

Saturday, March 24, 2018

8:00 p.m.

Conrad Room

Wolfe Center for the Performing Arts

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
BACHELOR OF MUSIC IN MUSIC COMPOSITION

PROGRAM

Turnsole (2017) Ashlin Hunter

1. Prelude
4. Allemande
5. Pavane
6. In Darkness
7. Duet

Hannah Stroth, *soprano*
 Natalie Magaña, *flute*
 Jack Smolenski, *bassoon*
 Gramm Drennen, *cello*
 Emily Morin, *piano*
 Yabetza Vivas-Irizarry, *conductor*

cross-stitchings (2016)

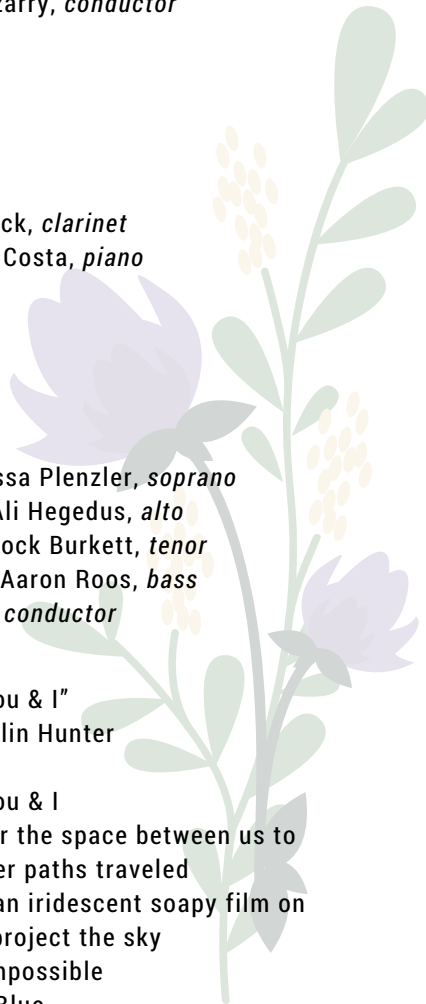
Jessica Pollack, *clarinet*
 Ariel Magno da Costa, *piano*

you & I (2017)

Hannah Stroth and Alissa Plenzler, *soprano*
 Hayley Hoss and Ali Hegedus, *alto*
 Avery Gerwin and Brock Burkett, *tenor*
 Abraham Roos and Aaron Roos, *bass*
 Adam O'Dell, *conductor*

"you & I"
 by Ashlin Hunter

you & I
 build a pearly web over the space between us to
 spin silks over paths traveled
 to fill the shapes with an iridescent soapy film on
 which we project the sky
 the impossible
 Blue



Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories (2017)


Natalie Magaña, *flute*
Caleb Burkhardt, *saxophone*

heirlooms for singing cellist and fixed media (2018)

Matthew Magerkurth, *cello*

lightfastness: *Field with Irises near Arles* (2018)

Natalie Magaña, *flutes*; Jessica Pollack, *clarinet*; Caleb Burkhardt,
saxophone; Jack Smolenski, *bassoon*
Enrico Solito, *trumpet*; Curtis Biggs, *trombone*
Nicholas Rossler, *guitar*; Sophia Jarrell and Ben Silberman, *violin*;
Kathryn Kibbe, *viola*
Gramm Drennen, *cello*; Jason Handron, *string bass*
Yabetza Vivas-Irizarry, *conductor*



Turnsole

Each year, two student composers are selected to write short chamber operas as a part of BGSU's MicroOpera project. Last year, I had the pleasure of working with fellow students to bring my first staged work to life. "Turnsole" is a narrative of obsession: at dawn, a girl admires the Sun's light and warmth (Scene 1). She sings to the Sun, but he can only give affection and love to the flowers (Scene 2-3). As sunset approaches, the girl wonders what makes the flowers worthy to receive the Sun's attention, eventually resolving to plant herself in the earth in order to become a flower (Scene 4). As night falls, the girl's transformation begins (Scene 6). With the sunrise, the girl is finally united with the Sun (Scene 7). Tonight's concert presents excerpts from "Turnsole."

Program Note:

"The term turnsole refers to a plant which is said always to follow the path of the sun across the sky—a sunflower. Generally, all plants exhibit a violent longing for light. When kept in the shade, they twist and turn and stretch their leaf-stalks beyond all expectations in order to catch some rays of the sun. In olden days this curious habit of theirs was attributed to an occult sympathy between flowers and sunlight. This affection between plants and the great luminary gives them life and beauty and the power of unceasing regeneration. As one approaches a blooming meadow from the east, he will see not a single blossom on the green carpet, but all the tiny, bright cups and clusters looking steadfastly toward the west. All flowers follow with loving devotion the brightness of its light, gazing at the sun, and turning towards it from sunrise to sunset."

adapted from *Appletons' Journal of Literature, Science, and Art: Volume V, No. 111* (May 13, 1871)

cross-stitchings

In many ways, "cross-stitchings" exists like jagged quilt squares: repetition, deviation, the fabric is bunched up in places, but all the material is held together by a single thread. In this case, the single thread is a chord progression that is presented in its most pure form at the end of the piece. Although the form of "cross-stitchings" is quite simple—a cycling bass line is woven between shifting piano textures and arpeggiated clarinet lines—the music is driven forward by the changing pulse and constant play between musicians.

you & I

When I decided to come to Ohio for school, I could not have anticipated how much the distance between here and home would challenge me. Being a thousand miles away from my family and closest friends became a palpable emptiness that I often pictured as a geographic expanse between my heart and theirs. I wrote this poem as a way to reimagine my homesickness—to fill the distance with beautiful things that connected us. When I decided to transform this poem into a piece for choir, I wanted the voices to build a bridge of shiny, colorful, ever-shifting objects of music between moments of palpable silence.

Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories

Have you ever noticed that the world is blue at its edges? Have you ever seen mountains or a skyline on the horizon and wondered why they look half faded into the sky?

Blue is the color of things that are far away.

What if old photographs and memories started turning blue—not because they're far away in geography, but in time—so that the cotton blanket that you slept with every night when you were five has started to turn blue in your memory.

"Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories" is a lullaby that's been distorted through time. It's been tinted and smeared because it's something you heard as a child.



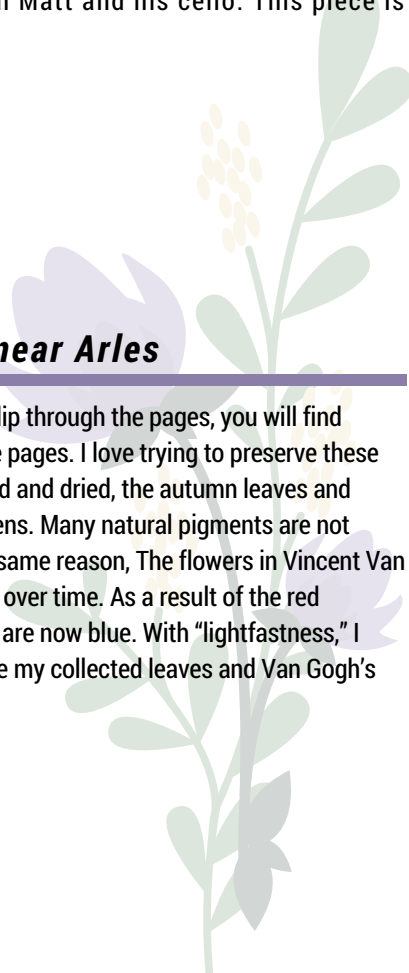
heirlooms

You are in a small room with a friend. As you sit across from each other and talk, their voice is familiar—it's a voice you've heard speak thousands of words over many years. The room is comfortable. The walls are the same color they've always been; the carpet is soft on your feet; the box on the shelf holds the heirlooms that are physical manifestations of good memories and friendship and family.

"heirlooms" was written for my dear friend Matt Magerkurth who I met when we were 15- and 16-years old at a summer composition workshop in Kansas City. This piece would not exist without our friendship. As I wrote this piece, I would pretend I was in that small room with Matt and his cello. This piece is what it felt like in that room.

lightfastness: *Field with Irises near Arles*

If you open any of my large, hard-backed books and flip through the pages, you will find pressed leaves and dried flowers nestled between the pages. I love trying to preserve these small bits of nature, but after months of being pressed and dried, the autumn leaves and spring flowers lose their vibrant oranges, reds, or greens. Many natural pigments are not lightfast—when exposed to light, they decay. For the same reason, The flowers in Vincent Van Gogh's *Field with Irises near Arles* have changed color over time. As a result of the red pigments' vulnerability to light, the once-purple irises are now blue. With "lightfastness," I created music that changes color over time, much like my collected leaves and Van Gogh's irises.



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